



A Langton Quarryman's Apprenticeship 1826 - 1837

I did not go to school but helped mother about the house and played with my brothers and sisters at the age of four I started Sunday school where I learnt to read the bible and write. In 1826 when I was 14 years old, I started my apprenticeship with my uncle. He had a quarry at Langton Matravers that my family had worked for over 70 years. On my first day my uncle took me underground, but however I got down without falling I do not know, for I was afraid I should fall at every step I took. It was about seventy or eighty feet deep and it went down, on a slope, about the same as you would place a ladder and it was paved about four feet wide from the bottom to the top. On this slope, a wooden cart about four feet (1.2 m) long and two feet six inches wide (0.76m) and one foot high (0.3m) was used to carry blocks of stone. On one side of the lane was some steps, between nine and 12 inches (0.3m) high and between 10 and 15 inches long; sometimes a step was missing and you had to jump over the gap. At the bottom there was a long lane, 50 to 60 yards (55m) long that went to the working face. The working face was a most dismal place I have ever seen, I had to work here, in the candle light it almost gave me the horrors.

When I was older, I was able to help my uncle move the blocks from this face. The block at ceiling level was the most stubborn, here the clay was hard and moving the pickaxe handle with your hand pinched against the ceiling was difficult, but once free the blocks below were much easier to remove. Once removed they were placed on to the cart and hauled the 50-60 yards to the surface. The lane was not flat and on occasions my uncle attached a rope to the two staples at the front, with me pushing with an iron bar from the back.

When we reached the slope, my uncle removed the rope, secured the load with chains and attached the cart to a chain leading to the surface. Then I went up the stairs to the surface, where I placed a 15 feet (4.6m) wooden pole into the capstan and the other end, I attached a donkey, then the donkey walked in circles around the capstan and slowly pulled up the loaded cart. When the cart arrived at the top, I removed the donkey and pulled the cart to one side and unloaded it. I then lowered the cart down the slope, returned to my uncle at the bottom and returned the cart to the face, where more blocks were loaded. After repeating this about twenty times 80ft (24.3m) of ceiling was exposed and required some support.

Ceiling support was very important, 80 feet of stone is very heavy, the support was called a pillar and placed on each side of the lane three feet apart, enough room for the cart. This was made of blocks of stone about 18 inches square and one foot thick that were placed on top of each other until they were securely wedged between the ceiling and the lane.

I finished my apprenticeship in 1837 at the age of 19, fully skilled in masonry skills and ready to move on. Some of my friends had already moved to London to work for John Mowlem where the wages were much higher and the work did not require working in a mine.

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